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Hamlet and the Pirates: A Critical Reconsideration

MARTIN STEVENS

The notion that Hamlet's rescue at sea by the pirates was not accidental has effectively been dismissed by critics ever since W. W. Lawrence deemed it "an absurd idea" on which "little time need be wasted." Ever since 1944, commentators on Hamlet have perpetuated the view that Shakespeare uses the intervention of the pirates as a deus-ex-machina device or, in Christian terms, as a providential event to bring about Hamlet's return to Denmark and prepare for his ultimate confrontation with Claudius. Thus, to cite one example, H. D. F. Kitto, in his famous essay on "Providence in Hamlet," characterizes the appearance of the pirate ship as a "lucky chance" in which, as in Hamlet's possession of his father's signet, "Heaven was ordinant." I would like to suggest that a close reading of the text will not permit this interpretation and that, indeed, the intervention of the pirates has been carefully prepared for by Shakespeare as part of the subterranean (and offstage) counterplotting by Hamlet which transpired during the course of Act III. In making this argument, I wish to emphasize the thematic importance of Hamlet's own role in effecting his rescue. It is at this point in the action that Hamlet commits himself irrevocably to premeditated bloodshed and vengeance. His plot to insure the murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is not just another rash act such as the killing of Polonius. In fact, this plot is Hamlet's most heinous offense, nothing short of cold and calculated murder. And it is this offense that eventually leads Hamlet to a new self-knowledge and to the inevitable tragic catastrophe.

I

The mission to England, both in its planning and in its execution, takes place entirely offstage; we therefore derive all of our information about it from what the characters say. And since Shakespeare, probably quite deliberately, has provided us with only the most skeletal details, we are left with only a hazy impression of what actually transpired. We do know the following facts. Claudius after observing Hamlet with Ophelia in Act III, scene i, has concluded that something other than a lover's malady is governing Hamlet's fantastic behavior and has accordingly decided in "quick determination" to send

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1 "Hamlet's Sea Voyage," PMLA, 59 (1944), 53, note 23.
Hamlet to England for what he calls “the demand of our neglected tribute” (III. i. 170–78). At a later point, after stopping the play within the play, Claudius has implemented his plan by instructing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort Hamlet to England (III. iii. 1–4). Except for a brief allusion later—“everything is sealed and done” (IV. iii. 55–70)—these are the only references by Claudius himself to the mission he has designed for Hamlet. Yet, as has often been noted, Hamlet mysteriously learns of the King’s plan sometime during the course of Act III. In III. iv. 199, he tells his mother, “I must to England. You know that?” and immediately thereafter he reveals his awareness of the sealed letters and of the names of his escorts. In this scene we learn that Gertrude apparently also knew of the plan, for in response to Hamlet she says she had forgotten that it was “so concluded on” (III. iv. 201). However, Shakespeare leaves his audience in the dark about numerous details. We cannot determine with certainty just when Claudius decided to send Hamlet to his death, for example,4 nor who told Gertrude and how much, nor how and when Hamlet himself learned of the mission, nor how much Rosencrantz and Guildenstern actually know. These unanswered and unanswerable questions would indicate that Shakespeare was uninterested in providing his audience with a totally coherent and sequential plan. Rather, it seems that he was satisfied merely to implant select details necessary for the particular dramatic response he was seeking from his spectators.

It will suffice, then, to recall that Claudius first decides to send Hamlet to England on a diplomatic mission, that later he prepares for Hamlet’s assassination, and that somehow Hamlet learns of the King’s intent (I will show shortly that Hamlet knew of the assassination order). To attempt a sequential accounting of these several pieces of intelligence and to fill in the missing information is to succumb to what one critic calls “the Iceberg Principle, or Principle of the Submerged Seven-Ninths; a Shakespeare play is only the visible part of the iceberg, and the critic is a skin-diver.”5 Shakespeare clearly intended to give only a vague account of Claudius’ plotting and Hamlet’s counterplotting in Act III; he wanted his audience to know only that the voyage to England was imminent and that both Claudius and Hamlet knew what they were up to. Hence, it matters little just when Claudius decided to change the intent of the mission or just how Hamlet found out about it. Since the whole of the England plan is extra-dramatic, it simply will not yield to ordinary laws of theatrical cause and effect. Thus, for example, Hamlet could not have learned about the sealed letters or about his escorts until after the opening of Act III, scene iii, when Claudius first mentions them. And yet, Hamlet is almost continually on stage from that time, immediately thereafter, when he observes Claudius

5 French, p. 30. Curiously, French himself succumbs to the “Iceberg Principle” when he undertakes to show at what point (offstage) Claudius wrote the letters of commission.
at prayer to the time when he tells Gertrude that he "must to England." There is simply no opportunity for him to have learned what he knows. The situation is comparable to the conflicting evidence regarding the passage of time in Othello, where according to one set of indications, as Bradley has noted (pp. 423-29), Desdemona dies after the lapse of at most a few days, even though, according to another set of indications, her death occurs several weeks after her arrival at Cyprus. The point is that Shakespeare will build what extradramatic background he needs, even at the risk of introducing illogicalities, in order to strengthen the dramatic illusion. It is only a modern audience conditioned by the canons of realism that allows itself to be bothered by such circumstances. What is important about the mission to England in Act III is thus clearly established: the spectator must realize that Claudius is developing a plan to remove Hamlet and that Hamlet, in turn, has become aware of that plan and is formulating his own plan in response.

It is now time to see just how much Hamlet had actually gleaned of Claudius' plot. The text is quite explicit on this point, although remarkably few readers, to my knowledge, have taken serious note of it. Before leaving his mother, Hamlet makes the following statement:

There's letters sealed, and my two school fellows,
Whom I will trust as I will adders fanged,
They bear the mandate. They must sweep my way,
And marshal me to knavery. Let it work,
For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
Hoist with his own petar. And 't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon: Oh, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet.

(III. iv. 202–10)

What is evident from this speech is (1) that Hamlet knows there are sealed orders calling for some unspecified "knavery" to be done against him, (2) that Hamlet knows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will accompany him to England, and (3) that Hamlet himself has apparently drawn up a counterplot.

6 The only brief moment when Hamlet is not on stage occurs immediately after the "prayer" scene. But even here there is no time for anything but a swift transition. Just before Hamlet exits, he tells us that his "mother stays" (III. iii. 95). And as the next scene opens, Polonius announces to the Queen, "He will come straight" (III. iv. 1). There is just enough time for Polonius to step behind the arras as Hamlet enters.

7 It should be noted that Hamlet's crucial lines about the sealed letters and his school fellows, III. iv. 202–10, are omitted from both the First Quarto and the First Folio. They are, however, preserved in the Second Quarto, generally conceded to be the most reliable text.

8 A reviewer identified in the Variorum Shakespeare (III, 353–54) by only his last name, Miles, argued as early as 1870 that the "piratical capture" was prearranged by Hamlet; see Southern Review, 8 (1870), 143–45. It is this argument that Lawrence characterized as "absurd." Another commentator, D. J. Snider, recognized the possibility that Hamlet was in collusion with the pirates, but he dismissed the idea on the basis of Hamlet's own account (V. ii. 5 ff.) which, in Snider's view, attributes the sea rescue entirely to rashness and "instinct"; see The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, 7 (1873), 83; rpt. in the Variorum Shakespeare, IV, 183–84. I shall return to this point later.

9 John Dover Wilson interprets the sentence "... they must sweep my way, / And marshal me to knavery" to mean that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were originally to be sent in advance as diplomatic couriers. He goes on to observe that Hamlet was unaware that the date of
which will make his malefactors the victims of the mandate they carry. There can be little question that lines 205–210 refer to the destiny that awaits Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at the end of their journey and not, as has been argued, to some unspecified plot against Claudius himself.10 If ever anyone was "hoist on his own petar," it was Hamlet's two school fellows. And when Hamlet tells us that he will dig "below their mines and blow them at the moon" (italics mine), he couldn't be more direct in his reference to his intended victims. The last sentence of the passage makes it clear beyond dispute, with its pun on craft, that Hamlet has engaged the pirates for the rendezvous at sea.11 The text thus establishes the fact that Hamlet has planned in advance for the intervention of the pirates.

Whatever objection can be raised against this conclusion would necessarily have to be based on revelations made by Hamlet in his letter to Horatio (IV. vi. 12–32) and in the subsequent firsthand report he gives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's fate (V. ii. 4–74). The letter, however, far from casting doubt on the idea of a prearranged rendezvous, helps to confirm it. Here Hamlet, after informing Horatio (and the audience) about the appearance of the pirate ship and his act of boarding it, explains that the pirates "have dealt with me like thieves of mercy; but they knew what they did" (IV. vi. 21). The latter clause is intriguingly vague. It readily suggests in its preterit construction that the whole encounter was planned in advance. The only fundamental question that the letter raises is why Hamlet did not tell Horatio directly about his counterplot. But in not drawing Horatio into his confidence at the point of his formulation of the counterplot, Hamlet is very much in character. We recall that Hamlet worked alone in devising "the Mousetrap," and that he told Horatio only the barest essentials just before its enactment. He has merely said:

There is a play tonight before the King.
One scene of it comes near the circumstance
Which I have told thee of my father's death.

(III. ii. 80–82)

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10 See, for example, G. R. Elliott, who writes as follows: "[Hamlet] snatches at the opportunity of making 'my two schoolfellows ... sweep my way and marshal me to knavery' (pp. 202 ff.), i.e., to the deed of regicide; he will not make his meaning explicit for the queen." Elliott goes on, "From now on [Hamlet] has to defend himself and his succession to the throne. To that point the plotting of Claudius will doubtless develop; Hamlet hopes so, with firm courage. He is confident, far more than we are, that he can outwit his clever uncle. His zest as a youthful soldier and tactician adds itself to his relief at being able to regard his coming regicide in 'one line' with his enemy's 'craft against himself'"; see Scourge and Minister: A Study of Hamlet (Durham, N. C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1951), pp. 124–25.

11 Although the OED lists the sense of "vessels" or "boats" only in a collective sense for the seventeenth century (see Craft, V.), the meaning of craft as a countable noun referring to a ship dates back to Anglo-Saxon times; cf. Bosworth-Toller’s An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, s.v. Craft, IV ("a craft, any kind of ship ... Gif massere gebeah he férde brège ofer wid-sé be his ãgenum craftte ..."; my italics). Also cf. Miles’ observation, pp. 143–44.
Not a word, even, about the authorship of the scene to be played before Claudius!

The most extensive account of Hamlet's sea adventure comes in his report to Horatio in Act V, scene ii. It is this account (together with the stabbing of Polonius) which is most often used as testimony of Hamlet's impulsiveness and, for that matter, as argument against the view that Hamlet is incapable of action. Hamlet himself speaks out in favor of rashness:

Rashly,
And praised be rashness for it, let us know,
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do pall. And that should learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Roughhew them how we will.

(V. ii. 6–11)

The fact is, however, that it was only in coping with the sealed letters that Hamlet acted rashly. The remarks about rashness serve as prelude to Hamlet's account of how he rushed from his cabin, groped in the dark to find the sleeping Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, removed the packet, and returned to his cabin, where he "made so bold" as to "unseal their grand commission" (V. ii. 13 ff). Hamlet's counterplot had not included provision for changing the mandate. That part of the plan (as contrasted with the appearance of the pirates) had to be ad-libbed by Hamlet in some fashion. It was, then, only in preparation for the meeting with the pirates that Hamlet acted rashly and that Providence was on his side. In explaining how he resealed the doctored mandate, he tells us that "even in that was Heaven ordinant" (V. ii. 48) because he happened to have his father's signet in his purse. It is only when Hamlet has finished describing the events leading up to the deception of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he mentions the pirates: "Now the next day / Was our sea fight, and what to this was sequent / Thou know'st already" (V. ii. 53–54). Clearly, the encounter with the pirates was part of the "roughhewn" plan, whereas Hamlet's act in preparation for the encounter and its aftermath was brought about, as Hamlet himself acknowledges, by his impulsiveness and by the intervention of Providence ("the divinity that shapes our ends"). In the context of this scene, Hamlet's reference to "deep plots" could only refer to his prearranged rendezvous with the pirates. A close reading of the text in all particulars, therefore, supports the conclusion that Shakespeare did not trust to accident in bringing Hamlet back to Denmark.12

II

Once we are aware that Hamlet himself and not luck or melodramatic circumstance is the agent responsible for the pirate's intervention, we have cleared

12 On yet another occasion in the play, Shakespeare gives indication that Hamlet was aware of the King's deepest plotting. When Claudius mentions to Hamlet that he must prepare himself to go to England, Hamlet counters three times in quick succession with the phrase "for England," registering an ironically compliant tone. He replies with "Good" to Claudius's directive, and when Claudius in turn responds, "So is it if thou knewest our purposes," Hamlet says cryptically, "I see a cherub that sees them" (IV. iii. 48–50). Surely this exchange suggests to a perceptive audience that Hamlet is not standing by idly, without his own behind-the-scene maneuvers.
away the major obstacle to an interpretation that Hamlet's tragedy is self-generated. Hamlet's problem from the beginning has been his obsession that he is scourge and minister of justice. He bewails, after his first encounter with the ghost, that "the time is out of joint" and that he "was born to set it right" (I. v. 189-90). Indeed, the action of Hamlet more than that of any other of the major tragedies is directly the issue of human volition; even the ghost is doomed to walk the night until Hamlet enacts the revenge that will release him. Even so, however, Hamlet, in his hubris, is blind to the restrictions imposed on men to shape their destinies. The function of the sea adventure is to teach him about the interaction between human will and Providence.

The traditional interpretation of the pirates' intervention as imposed by some outside force leaves Hamlet in a state of suspended animation just at the time when his consciousness of his past inertia is rearoused and when he gives every indication that he is ready to execute the ghost's mandate. He is, first of all, intent in killing Claudius

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed—
At gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't...

(III. iii. 89-92)

A Hamlet who passively submits to the mission Claudius has planned for him, trusting only to some miraculous intervention to hinder the King's course, could hardly fulfill this obsessive intention. Such submissiveness would serve, further, to take the edge off the second appearance of the ghost. For Hamlet to be made aware of his tardiness and his "almost blunted purpose" (III. iv. 111) and then to wallow again in irresolution would render the ghost's effect trivial. What is more, this is the very time of the play when Hamlet sees himself as "scourge and minister" (III. iv. 175), ordained by Heaven to restore the realm. A man in such a frame of mind will hardly allow himself to be wafted out to sea by the enemy he has sworn to destroy. But most incongruous of all would be Hamlet's vow at the end of his famous soliloquy in Act IV: "from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" (IV. v. 65-66).

Would such a vow square with W. W. Lawrence's characterization of Hamlet as projected through the eye of the Elizabethan spectator: "Well, this fellow knows that he is inclined to put things off, but he means to do better, and after this trip to England is over we shall get some action"? The fact is that this soliloquy occurs in a situation totally parallel with the "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy of Act II. In both soliloquies Hamlet reflects upon his past inertia at just the time when he has formulated a stratagem to advance his cause. Both soliloquies are directly in response to the acts of "performers"—the players in the first instance, and Fortinbras with his army in the second. Both soliloquies, finally, end in a couplet that promises a new dedication by Hamlet to carry out his purposes. These parallels implicitly serve to emphasize for the spectator that Hamlet habitually works stratagems behind the scenes to advance his ends. The indications are, then, that Shakespeare, far from characterizing

13 Lawrence, p. 63.
Hamlet as surrendering to the will of Claudius and the control of chance, portrays him now as fiercely intent on fulfilling the ghost’s “dread command.” When the intervention of the pirates is understood as an act willed by Hamlet, an important dynamic of the play comes into clearer focus. Hamlet is essentially a play of plots and counterplots, of intrigue and craftiness. Since human volition is at the very core of the central action, it is right that stratagems and machinations, demonstrating the power of the individual will, occupy a prominent place in the dramatic design. It is, in fact, possible to detect an alternation of “moves” (much as in a chess game) between protagonist and antagonist as the essential thrust in the dramatic action of the play. The first part of this game, covering roughly Acts II and III, has to do with discovery. Hamlet needs to see for himself the evidence of Claudius’ guilt, and Claudius in turn has to know how much Hamlet knows. The mechanism most suited for carrying out stratagems of discovery is theatrical play, and as a result practically all of the plotting and counterplotting in Acts II and III is done by characters in the guises of actors and spectators. Hamlet “puts on an antic disposition” (italics mine), and Polonius and Claudius resolve to eavesdrop on him. In turn, as Dover Wilson has brilliantly shown, Hamlet eavesdrops on the eavesdroppers. All the time, then, there is an air of “playful” intrigue as the principals test each other out, jockeying for position. And, interestingly, the stage is almost constantly peopled with spectators. Hamlet is introduced to us as a peripheral spectator; he observes (as we do) the pomp and ceremony of state, while Claudius occupies center-stage. In Act II, Hamlet and Claudius exchange roles, with Hamlet becoming actor and Claudius spectator. All of Claudius’ attention now focuses on observing Hamlet; to that end he summons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and to that end he conspires with Polonius to hide “behind an arras” (II. ii. 163) during Hamlet’s encounter with Ophelia. The arras, whether in a literal or in a figurative sense, becomes an object of great theatrical prominence because, throughout Act III especially, it demarcates the stage players and the stage auditors. At the beginning of Act III, Polonius and Claudius “bestow” themselves (III. i. 43) to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia. Although the text gives no clear indication of it, it seems likely that Hamlet becomes aware of the spies and puts on a special performance for them. After he asks “Where’s your father?” and Ophelia replies “At home, my lord,” Hamlet now once more as actor turned spectator appropriately responds: “Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in’s own house” (III. i. 132–36). The play within the play follows. Now Hamlet is the strategist, and his dozen or sixteen lines are designed to “catch the conscience of the king.” Once again the dramatis personae are sorted out into players and spectators until the play, at the moment of discovery, is abruptly stopped. Now role playing has come to a shocking end, and the opponents prepare for a new phase of more deadly combat. Before Act III concludes, however, there

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14 This feature of the play has been set forth interestingly by Warren V. Shephard’s article “Hoisting the Engine with his own Petar,” SQ, 7 (1956), 281–85. Shephard notices the patterned plots and counterplots of the play but curiously remains vague about Hamlet’s plan to counter Claudius’ order for the sea voyage. He simply asserts, “The King makes a plan; Hamlet counters in kind” (p. 284).
15 See Wilson, pp. 88–114.
are two more scenes of spying, one occurring by happenstance, the other by design. Hamlet is a chance spectator of Claudius at prayer, thus making the last discovery about the "conscience of the king." And Polonius, true to his ever devious nature, has planted himself behind the arras in Gertrude's closet to enact a gratuitous curtain scene. The stabbing of Polonius through the arras marks the end of the theatrical metaphor. The curtain has been punctured; it is no longer needed. The conflict is now in the open, and the essential discoveries have been made.

The second, more deadly phase in the game of strategies is now ready to commence in earnest. With his full realization that Hamlet is aware of his "rank offense," Claudius plans first to remove his adversary to England and then to have him killed. Hamlet, in turn, becomes aware of the king's plan and devises his own counter-strategy. Much as he prevailed in the first phase of strategies, Hamlet also wins in the second phase. He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, saves his own life, and stations himself firmly on Danish soil to effect his revenge. In the overall configuration of the play, then, Shakespeare provides a pattern of stratagems which, at least for the first two phases of the action, results entirely from the willful design of the hero and the villain. Hamlet, on his return to Denmark, has abandoned his erstwhile role as player and spectator and now stands in readiness (as he will tell us) to exact the last measure of his revenge.

Phase three of the action is the final direct combat, appropriately enacted in a deadly duel. Just as appropriately—given Hamlet's fall from grace—it ends without a winner. Even the setting changes starkly; where earlier we experienced Denmark at banquet and in theatrical play, we now reenter it through the churchyard. And while the outward manifestation of play is still here—after all, Claudius and Laertes are planning a new kind of "entertainment"—there is a dread-inspiring grimness about it all. We need only recall that, in Act V, Hamlet enters in the cemetery and exits in a "dead march." As usual in Shakespeare, the macrocosm reflects the microcosm; the churchyard in which we reencounter Hamlet reflects, in tonality if not in image, his new state of mind. He has been transformed by his sea adventure, an occurrence that has rightly been deemed of important spiritual significance.16 The self-generating actor, the player extraordinaire, the man who sees himself as minister and scourge has discovered that his own designs are insufficient, that there is, indeed, "a divinity that shapes" our rough Hewn ends. With this recognition, he is ready to entrust himself to Providence rather than merely to respond to a vague "dread of something after death" (III. i. 78). He is finally able to confront Claudius without a plan. Replying to Horatio's sense of imminent discovery—Horatio fears that Hamlet's sea actions "will be shortly known to [Claudius] from England" (V. ii. 71)—a new, more serene Hamlet is able to say: "It will be short. The interim is mine, and a man's life no more than to say 'One'" (V. ii. 73-74). Again, shortly later, when Horatio, warning Hamlet that he will lose the wager, wants to forestall the fencing match, the new Hamlet replies:

We defy augury. There's special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. (V. ii. 230–33)

What is clear from this view of *Hamlet* is that in the third phase of the action there is a new Hamlet confronting the old Claudius, who is still as occupied as ever in intrigue and treachery. It is this moral stasis which ultimately results in Claudius' defeat on a level far more significant than the mere loss of a duel. While the final plot has no winners, the tragic conflict does. Hamlet, even in death, prevails over Claudius.

I have attempted to demonstrate in this paper that Shakespeare, at least in the best version of *Hamlet*, gave various clues to his audience that Hamlet's encounter with the pirates was carefully planned. This view stands in conflict with the common assumption that Shakespeare allowed chance to intervene in his hero's tragic destiny, with the implication that accidental occurrences, in the words of W. W. Lawrence, "play a part in the lives of all of us—a chance meeting, a letter gone astray, a sudden death, and so forth." I contend that "accident" in this sense may be suitable for realistic fiction (from which, obviously, Lawrence derives his canon), but is alien as a motive force for Shakespeare. Not only does a close reading of the text belie such an interpretation; it positively begs us to see Hamlet's intervention in Claudius' design as part of the larger conflict in which Hamlet consistently outwits his opponent.

On a deeper level of significance, the sea adventure is the last link in a chain of self-willed events. It leads Hamlet, almost imperceptibly, to a new realization of the limits within which he can "act." Before the sea adventure, Hamlet measured his inertia against the player's ability to "force his soul . . . to his own conceit" (II. ii. 579), and he resolved on the player's example to use his own craft in fashioning Claudius' discovery scene. But Hamlet comes to recognize that his craft, viewed in the larger perspective, is only playcraft. The artist can fully shape his own designs; the minister of justice cannot. That, in essence, is the insight Hamlet gains when he is, literally and figuratively, at sea.

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17 Lawrence, p. 70.